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ABSTRACT

This study examines the success of community colleges in providing students with adequate college-preparatory instruction. Research focuses on the place of remedial writing instruction in two California Community Colleges, one large and urban, the other smaller and suburban. The study used transcript analysis to investigate how well students from the two key college preparatory writing courses -- one an ESL course and one a non-credit beginning college reading and writing course -- fared in their academic work. The guiding research questions were: (1) how well do students in developmental writing courses fare in subsequent academic writing courses? (progress tracking); and (2) how well do Associate Degree English and college level English students with different instructional histories do in their academic writing classes? (historical tracking). The research found that for many students, remedial coursework is preliminary to extensive further college work, and the ESL cohort is most academically accomplished. The non-ESL students, the pre-collegiate basic skills students starting their college career with "English Fundamentals," did not fare as well. Only 58.6% passed the course, compared to 65.5% of the ESL students. Tables, charts and figures illustrate ethnicity demographics, cohort descriptive statistics, college English outcomes, progress tracking, failure and withdrawal rates by group, and grade point average. (17 references) (AS)

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Tracking Outcomes for Community College Students with Different Writing Instruction Histories

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Tracking Outcomes for Community College Students with Different Writing Instruction Histories[1]

Paper presented at
California Association for Institutional Research, San Diego, CA, November 1998
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Introduction:
The Place of Remedial Writing Instruction in California Community Colleges

Remedial and ESL instruction to prepare students for college-level work is one of three missions assumed by California community colleges. Of the system's three missions--the other two are to provide the first two years of general education for aspiring transfer students and to provide vocational programs and re-training--it is the only one that has experienced consistent growth in the last decade. That growth has elicited mixed feelings at best, and more often than not, it is met with dismay. At one urban community college, the sentiment expressed has often been, "We're not a college anymore, we're an ESL school." It is perhaps because of this backdrop that institutional success in this area has rarely been investigated. And yet, remedial and ESL students keep coming, and with recent decisions by both California State Universities and University of California campuses to direct remedial students to two-year colleges, institutional success in this area is becoming more and more important.

How successful are community colleges in college-preparatory instruction? This is the key research question framing the current study. To begin answering it, the study focuses on college-preparatory writing instruction at two urban community colleges. Students in both "remedial" and ESL college writing instruction are identified and their progress is tracked in order to answer such fundamental institutional research questions as: Does remedial writing instruction work? What students does it serve? Does it serve different students than ESL writing instruction does? How do its outcomes compare to the outcomes of ESL writing instruction? The paucity of prior work in this area is such that the very notion of institutional success remains to be defined. Professional bodies like TESOL and its California correlate, CATESOL, have supported a number of research and curriculum initiatives in the area of ESL instruction, and these yield at least a partial picture of ESL composition students and their experiences (see particularly Ching, Ediger, & Poole, 1996). No organization has taken a similar interest in remedial students, and we know almost nothing about them. And yet, they have been with us for a long time, and will be increasingly with us in the future.

As Denise Murray points out in her excellent overview of remediation and articulation issues stemming from the California State University's decision to phase out remedial instruction by 2007, "remedial education in the United States ... has a long history" (Murray, 1996, p. 175). In fact, the first California remedial English course was established in 1902 by the University of California for students who had failed its "Examination in Subject A," an entrance requirement in English composition established in 1898 (1996, p. 177). Murray's historical research reveals how often educators and politicians have claimed that new students entering higher education are not prepared to do so--time and again, it turns out. The claims go back at least one century. As she puts it, "The question is not so much one of whether students are less prepared ... but more what they are unprepared for and whether the segments they are entering are prepared for them" (1996, p. 177).

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[1] This research is partially funded by a generous grant from the Spencer Foundation. The views expressed are entirely the authors', and no endorsement should be assumed or inferred.

how often educators and politicians have claimed that new students entering higher education are not prepared to do so--time and again, it turns out. The claims go back at least one century. As she puts it, "The question is not so much one of whether students are less prepared ... but more what they are unprepared for and whether the segments they are entering are prepared for them" (1996, p. 177).

Often, the two-year segment is assumed to be the right segment for remedial students. Community colleges are assumed to be "prepared for them." Indeed, the executive order aiming to phase remedial instruction out of the California State University steers potential remedial students to California Community Colleges (see Executive Order No. 665, Office of the Chancellor, California State University), and the University of California has already begun to "outsource" remedial composition courses (Lane, Brinton, & Erickson, 1996, p. 107) to some community colleges. The community college curriculum is thus perceived as a good fit for the needs of underprepared students aspiring to a higher education. How accurate is that perception? And how do the affected parties--community college staff and remedial students--view the remediation plans and practices that emanate from California universities?

Currently, the only student views on record come from the hearings held by the California State University Board of Governors prior to its decision to phase out remediation. Students who managed to speak at these hearings denounced the Board's plans as elitist and hostile. Community college staff members voiced more muted objections. While community college faculty and staff bitterly resent the universities' perception of their institutions as academic dumping grounds, the transfer mission is by far the one with the highest local status, something that rubs off on transfer students. California State University students, even remedial California State University Students, acquire something akin to "real" college student status, and it is often hoped that their remedial visits will turn into more extended stays. Nevertheless, there is concern about having been passed on an instructional task without corresponding instructional funding, and there is concern about the eventual articulation of community college remedial efforts with transfer-receiving institutions. Rumors persist that community college writing courses are not granted degree or graduation requirement credit despite existing articulation agreements. Writing faculty members suspect that remedial students are not the only ones afforded a hostile reception at the universities--they suspect that their community college instruction fares no better.

The decentralized, some would say piecemeal nature of transfer and articulation agreements in California makes it difficult to assess the validity of these concerns. It is important, however, to provide at least a sense of the sentiments surrounding community college remediation efforts. It is safe to say that remediation meets with a universally hostile campus climate, even on those campuses assumed to be primary providers of those efforts. It is reasonable to believe that such unrelenting hostility influences the delivery of those services, as well as the eventual experiences of remedial students. Before such empirical questions can be investigated, however, we need to know the answers to the basic institutional research questions raised by current remediation efforts. We need to know who remedial students are, how many of them there are, and what happens to them.

These basic institutional research questions form the basis of our pilot study. The study identifies remedial and ESL composition students at one urban community college and follows their progress through writing instruction. It ascertains how successful students in college-preparatory writing classes are as they progress to college composition courses. The study is based on student transcript data, and as such, can only provide partial answers to the fundamental institutional questions raised by the remedial enterprise. The study is meant to establish some

baselines--some operational definitions of success that can be applied to more transcript data sets in the future and that can guide a more in-depth, qualitatively grounded investigation of student experiences.

Methodology

Data Sources and Subjects

All data for the study were drawn from two community colleges, a large, urban college, College 1, and a smaller, more suburban college, College 2. The study investigated how well students from two key college preparatory writing courses fare in their writing courses and in their subsequent academic work. The two courses were the last ESL college writing course in the local ESL curriculum sequence and a non-degree credit remedial college English course called "English Fundamentals" and described in the college catalogue as "Beginning college reading and writing." Viewed from transfer-receiving institutions, both courses are two levels below freshman composition. In local terms, successful completion of either course allows students to enroll in an "Intermediate reading and composition" course that yields AA degree credit and that satisfies the composition graduation requirement for a two-year degree. For many community college students with vocational aspirations, this AA-English-level course is the college English course, often the last English course they will ever take. Completion of the AA-English-level course makes students eligible for the transfer-English composition course, English 101. All students in either of the two key sending-courses in a given semester formed the subjects of this study.

Analysis

A handful of SAS procedures allows the creation of a set of programs that can accomplish a wide range of commonly undertaken institutional research (IR) tasks, such as student outcomes assessment. Three key procedures are the creation of a longitudinal student transcript database, the creation of working data sets, and the use of by-group processing.

The analysis piloted in this study could only be undertaken after a longitudinal student transcript database was assembled. For each college, the tracking database is a group of data sets produced from the district database. Whereas typical management information system (MIS) architecture is organized around the instructional or course offerings database, the longitudinal database is organized around individual transcripts as the key unit of analysis. We produce a master transcript file, which requires the merging of the instructional database with common student enrollment database elements (such as grade, add date, drop date). The master transcript file is then sorted by student id and semester. This organization is fundamental for the application of student tracking and transcript analysis procedures.

Working data sets are then created using applicable criteria, such as the enrollment in a target course. For the current study, all students enrolling in the two key sending courses were first identified and their English and ESL enrollments were subsequently pulled from the master transcript database. These "English composition transcripts" were then tagged for the presence of enrollments in and successful completions of either the AA- or the College English composition course. The identification of cohorts and their subsequent English enrollments made use of SAS by-group processing, and merging between intermediate SAS data sets (see Appendix A for a fuller discussion).

By focusing on the individual student transcript and making it the basic unit of analysis, the system diverges from other MIS-inspired outcomes assessment efforts to date. Most other

databases are organized around a semesterly calculus, and yield data about semesterly research questions. As a result, they often lack longitudinal depth, and questions requiring multiple semesters of data cannot be easily investigated. This has not presented much of a problem for the kinds of questions local institutional research offices have had to answer so far. Even the newest requirements for outcomes assessment can be accommodated with semesterly databases. Graduation rates, transfer rates, and retention rates can be estimated on the basis of semesterly data. The key is to reach agreed-upon definitions for such data elements as "transfer students," or for those elements that go into the denominator in any rate calculation. As institutional research becomes more interested in answering the kinds of questions investigated in this study, however, it will require longitudinal student tracking and transcript analysis tools.

In addition to the master transcript file, the tracking system assembles other datasets containing information about students found in the district databases. Minimally, these include basic demographic information and assessment information. We are also working on a student financial aid information database that would allow us to investigate the influence of socio-economic variables and various campus support systems.

Research Questions

This pilot study, inspired by earlier findings (see Dillon, 1996; Patthey-Chavez, 1996; Thomas-Spiegel, 1996) can be conceptualized as an outcomes assessment for remedial or basic skills instruction at two community colleges, College 1 and College 2. It did so in two complementary ways: By tracking the progress of different college preparatory cohorts through the community college writing curriculum (progress-tracking), and by tracking the instructional histories of Associate Degree English and College English students (historical tracking). Two basic research questions guided the inquiry:

Progress tracking: How well do students in developmental writing courses fare in subsequent academic writing courses?

Historical tracking: How well do Associate Degree English and College level English students with different instructional histories do in their academic writing classes?

Though we plan to expand the investigation into other areas of remedial student coursework and progress, we limited the current pilot study to writing instruction. In both colleges, the writing curriculum proceeds from developmental to AA-level to college level coursework, and in both colleges, the specific articulation of ESL writing courses remains to be worked out. Figure 1 provides an overview of the ideal course-progression in composition.

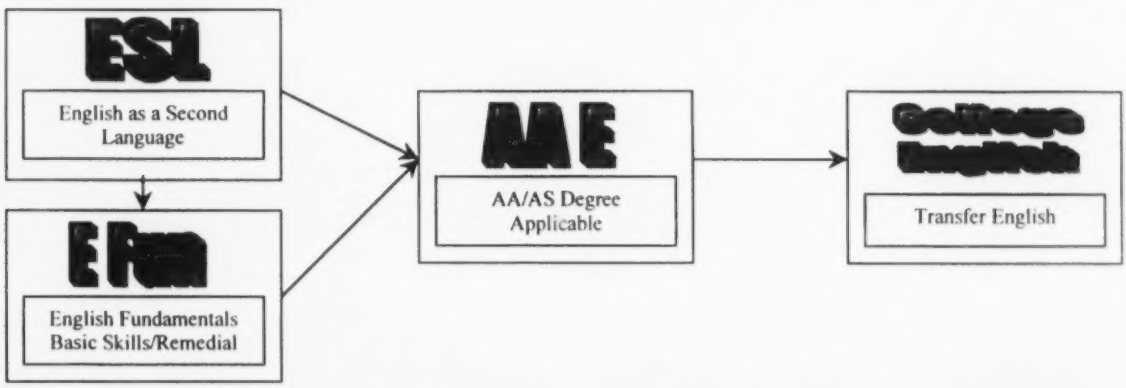


Figure 1. English Course Progression

Cohort Definitions

For both progress and historical tracking, cohorts were defined according to their instructional experiences. In the case of progress-tracking, three cohorts could be identified:

a) Students who enrolled in the last ESL writing course in each college's sequence (ESL)
b) Students who enrolled in "English Fundamentals" (E Fun)
c) Students who experienced both remedial English and ESL writing instruction (Both)

In the case of historical tracking, a fourth group consisted of those students who started their writing instruction in AA-level English or above, yielding the following four cohorts;

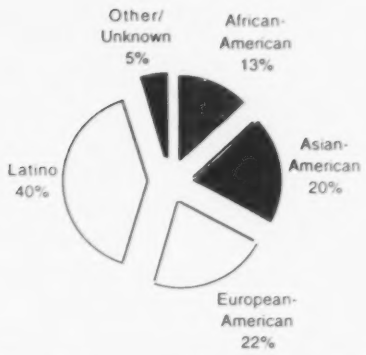
a) Students who enrolled in the last ESL writing course in each college's sequence before taking AA-level English (ESL)
b) Students who enrolled in "English Fundamentals" (E Fun) before taking AA-level English
c) Students who experienced both remedial English and ESL writing instruction before taking AA-level English (Both)
d) Students who were placed in AA-level English or above (AA+ Plc)

The authors need to point out that our inquiry was limited to locally available data. Given the demographic characteristics of both campuses and especially College 1, it is highly likely that many more students have had ESL instruction, and that many of those students who were grouped into the "English Fundamentals" category are ESL speakers and writers. Over half of College 1's students indicate that English is not their first or primary language, as do 22% of students in College 2, and many "English Fundamentals" instructors feel that some of their students would probably be better served in the equivalent ESL writing course. For the study, however, they were only classified as ESL writing students if they had attended college ESL classes at each respective college.

Figures 2 and 3 below provide a quick overview of the ethnic and language demographic characteristics found at each campus. As these distributions make clear, the colleges have similar ethnic diversity, but College 1's Primary Language Profile is quite distinct and more international than College 2's Primary Language Profile. Only 22% of College 2's students indicate that English is not their primary language, compared to 57% of College 1's students. A number of language-minority groups have substantial populations at College 1—among them speakers of Armenian, Korean, Russian, and Spanish.

Figure 2. Ethnicity Demographics of Colleges

College 1



College 2

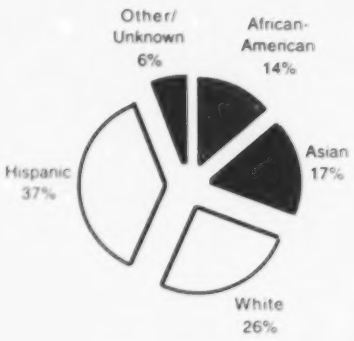
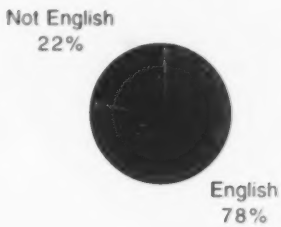


Figure 3. Primary Language of Colleges



Results

Progress Tracking

Progress tracking had to be adapted to each college's unique set of circumstances, and these adaptations are somewhat complex in the case of College 2, where ESL cohorts tend to be quite small. Different semesters had to be combined to maintain adequate sample sizes, and a fifth somewhat unique cohort had to be tracked separately. In contrast, cohorts at College 1 are all large enough so progress tracking can start with the same semester. Cohorts from three Fall semesters, Fall 1993, Fall 1994, and Fall 1995 were all tracked, and similar results emerged.

We start with a quick overview of cohort statistics from all three sending semesters at College 1. In each semester, the two key sending courses in each semester had over 1,000 students who received either a grade or a 'W', though there was a steady erosion in the overall enrollment.

Table 1: Cohort Descriptive Statistics
Progress Tracking - College 1

	ESL	E Fun	Both
Fall 1993 N	226	648	355
Fall 1994 N	177	625	331
Fall 1995 N	141	574	292
Total Sample	544	1847	915
Fall 1993 Pass	170 or 75.2%	408 or 63.0%	259 or 73.0%
Fall 1994 Pass	116 or 65.5%	366 or 58.6%	233 or 70.4%
Fall 1995 Pass	84 or 59.6%	351 or 61.1%	201 or 56.6%
Overall	370 or 68.0%	1125 or 60.9%	693 or 75.7%

On the whole, the cohorts that combined ESL and English Fundamentals instruction had the highest initial passing rates, and the groups who only signed up for English Fundamentals had the lowest, though Fall 1995 presented a different and rather unusual pattern in that respect. Grade distributions and passing rates for other semesters (e.g., Spring semesters) confirm that Fall 1993 and Fall 1994 present the more typical pattern. To present the clearest case, we therefore focus on data from one specific semester at College 1, Fall 1994.

To answer our research question, we operationalized it into six measures of success:

- Success measure 1: AA-English progress rate for each group. That is, the proportion of each initial group that attempt and eventually pass AA-level English (by Spring 1997)
- Success measure 2: Successful completion of AA-level English by Spring 1996 (within three semesters of ESL or E Fun enrollment)
- Success measure 3: Successful completion of College English by Spring 1997 (within five semesters of ESL or E Fun enrollment)
- Success measure 4: Failed attempts to complete AA-level English
- Success measure 5: Failed attempts to complete College English

The first three measures in part reflect what we have learned about the amount of time it takes students to get through the writing curriculum. Some students appear ready to try and in fact do succeed in AA-level English the semester after they complete their college preparatory course; others appear to need more time. Success rates peak three semesters after a preparatory course, and do not improve much after that. By tracking the earlier, 1993 cohort, we learned that more time does not improve outcomes after five semesters, though a few students complete AA-level English up to ten semesters after their initial English or ESL enrollment. Few of the students tracked, however, are ready for College English even after passing AA-level English, and College English enrollment actually picks up in the third and fourth semesters after enrollment in a developmental course. Our longitudinal measures (Measures 2 and 3, AA-level or College English Completion) incorporate these realities. In addition, we ascertain whether each student in each cohort ever attempts AA-level English, how many times they attempt it, and how many eventually pass by the seventh semester after remedial or ESL enrollment (Measure 1).

Since it is clear to us that a substantial number of AA-level English students have no further plans for academic writing instruction, our College English measures are not exactly measures of success, at least not to the same degree as the other three. Student aspirations, which could help identify transfer students in each group, are currently only collected systematically through the admissions process. These goals are not explained to the students, and coded as "uninformed student goals" in the database. They are not reliable, and "informed" student goals are collected through a still not fully automated student advisement process. Nevertheless, we plan to integrate the available information and explore any emergent patterns in the future.

Our fourth and fifth measure (failed attempts) were partially inspired by early results. These indicated a substantial, perhaps statistically significant difference in unsuccessful outcomes. The patterns of student failures and withdrawals suggest that some college preparatory students are more savvy about when to leave a given course than others. In addition, students who complete a preparatory course successfully are assumed to be ready for the next level, and differences in student failures are hence a potentially fruitful measure of institutional success, at least in the area of writing instruction.

We begin by discussing our longitudinal measures, Measures 1, 2, and 3. Table 2 focuses on the progress rates of each cohort, that is, on the students in each cohort that enroll in AA-level English, and on their eventual success rate by Spring 1997, some seven semesters later. Table 3 presents a three-semester overview of student enrollments in AA-level English after Fall 1994. Success Rates are highlighted, and each group's cumulative GPA in AA-level English is also provided. In addition, Table 3 provides a second estimate of each group's success rates based on only the number of students who passed the original sending course. It can reasonably be argued that students who failed their college preparatory course are not prepared for college composition, hence it is only reasonable to exclude them from any estimate of success.

Table 2: AA-level English Progress Rates by Group

	Enroll Once	Enroll Twice +	Success Rate By Spring 1997	Enrollment Rate By Spring 1997
ESL only	86	9	45.2%	55.2%
E Fun only	243	83	36.7%	56.9%
Both ESL & Fun	151	45	46.2%	59.2%

Table 3: AA-English Outcomes
Progress Tracking to Spring 1996

ESL only N=177 Pass=116	Spring 95	Fall 95	Spring 96	Cum Total	Success Rate	Passing, Success Rate
Enroll	78	8	10	96		
Pass	62	5	8	75	**42.4%**	**64.7%**
Fail	5	1	1	7		
Withdraw	11	2	1	14		GPA=2.79
E Fun only N=625 Pass=366	**Spring 95**	**Fall 95**	**Spring 96**	**Cum Total**	**Success Rate**	**Passing, Success Rate**
Enroll	232	93	50	375		
Pass	134	52	18	204	**32.6%**	**55.7%**
Fail	43	12	8	63		
Withdraw	55	29	24	108		GPA=2.08
Both N=331 Pass=233	**Spring 95**	**Fall 95**	**Spring 96**	**Cum Total**	**Success Rate**	**Passing, Success Rate**
Enroll	82	73	44	199		
Pass	50	44	30	124	**37.5%**	**53.2%**
Fail	14	9	4	27		
Withdraw	18	20	10	48		GPA=2.45

Tables 2 and 3 tell similar stories. It appears that students who function well enough in their last ESL academic writing class to progress straight to AA-level English are the most successful. They also tend to proceed to that course immediately upon completing their ESL writing course. 78 students or 74% of the 105 students that eventually enrolled in the target course did so in Spring 95, and 62 of them, or 79.5%, passed the course. Though many students from the English Fundamentals course also enroll in that first semester (232 or 71.2% of the 326 who ever enroll), their initial success rate is much lower, only 57.8%. The group of students that have experienced both ESL and English Fundamental Instruction is more cautious; only 82, or 41.8% give it a try that first Spring semester, with an initial success rate of 61% (50 of those 82).

ESL students maintain their momentum, and eventually, 45.2% of the 177 students succeed in AA-level English (see Table 2). The ESL & English Fundamentals group catches up with the ESL group, with an eventual success rate of 46.2% (see Table 2). The English Fundamentals group does not, and at the close of Spring 1997, 36.7% of the initial 625 who started in Fall 1994 complete AA-level English successfully. Similar patterns of success emerge for a shorter time period (Table 3). ESL-only students outperform both other groups, with a 42.4% success rate vs. 32.6% for English Fundamentals and 37.5% for the "Both" group. Similar patterns also find themselves reflected in each group's cumulative GPA. With a cumulative GPA of 2.79, the ESL group is ahead of the ESL & English Fundamentals group's GPA of 2.45, and

almost a grade point ahead of the English Fundamentals group, who maintain something of a C-average with a GPA of 2.08. When only students who passed each sending course are examined, success rates even out a bit. ESL-only students are still the most successful, with 64.7% of all 116 passing students succeeding in AA-level English, but more than half of the students from other two groups, 55.7% (E Fun) and 53.2% (Both) respectively, also pass AA-level English.

Group success rates are somewhat different for College English. Table 4 provides an overview of College English results. Not surprisingly, the most timid group is the one comprised of students who received both types of writing instruction; that group is the one making the slowest progress. By Spring 1997, only 11.8% have successfully completed College English, and their College English enrollments are still quite strong. For both of the other groups, College English enrollments appear to have peaked and are dropping off by Spring 1997. On the whole, however, successful completion rates are not high for any group. ESL students outperform English Fundamentals students, with respective success rates of 14.7% vs. 13.1%. They also maintain their edge in group GPAs. With a cumulative GPA of 3.04, the ESL group is once again ahead of the "Both" group's GPA of 2.70, and ahead of the English Fundamentals group's GPA of 2.32. There is one measure, however, where success rates are beginning to even out, and that is the success rates of each cohort's passing students. When only students who passed each sending course are examined, ESL-only students and English Fundamentals students have identical success rates, 22.4%. In keeping with their lower enrollment rates, the "Both" group's passing cohort success rate is somewhat lower, 16.7%.

Table 4: College English Outcomes
Progress Tracking to Spring 1997

ESL only N=177 Pass=116	S95 - S96	Fall 96	Spring 97	Cum Total	Success Rate	Passing, Success Rate
Enroll	24	7	4	35		
Pass	19	4	3	26	**14.7%**	22.4%
Fail	0	0	0	0		
Withdraw	5	3	1	9		GPA=3.04
E Fun only N=625 Pass=366	**S95 - S96**	**Fall 96**	**Spring 97**	**Cum Total**	**Success Rate**	**Passing, Success Rate**
Enroll	95	26	14	135		
Pass	59	17	6	82	**13.1%**	22.4%
Fail	15	1	2	18		
Withdraw	21	8	6	35		GPA=2.32
Both N=331 Pass=233	**S95 - S96**	**Fall 96**	**Spring 97**	**Cum Total**	**Success Rate**	**Passing, Success Rate**
Enroll	34	15	11	60		
Pass	24	9	6	39	**11.8%**	16.7%
Fail	3	1	4	8		
Withdraw	7	5	1	13		GPA=2.70

Ultimately, the extent to which College-English completion rates measure success is not clear, since it is difficult to determine how many of each initial cohort aspired to transfer. Available data suggest that transfer is a goal for an increasing number of students in higher academic English classes. In ESL, transfer is the goal of only 2.5% of all level 1 students. That goal rate increases gradually until level 6, where 27.7% students declare it as their uninformed education goal. In the English curriculum sequence, a similar increase is observed, from 25.6% at the English Fundamentals level to 29.5% at the AA-level, to 44.7% for College English students (Patthey-Chavez, 1996).

The problematic nature of available data is one of the reasons for the final two measures of success examine here. It is reasonable to assume that students who enroll in a course want to complete it successfully, hence their failures or withdrawals can be examined and compared. Table 5 presents the results of such a comparison. It shows the failure and withdrawal rates both of the initial cohorts and of those cohorts' passing students. This second estimate of student success in a subsequent course is especially important in light of recent efforts to set and enforce appropriate prerequisites. Failure rates of students who have passed a preparatory course should be low, since passing the sending course presumably signals their readiness for the next level.

Table 5: Failure & Withdrawal Rates by Group

	Failure Rate	Withdraw Rate	Original Pass, Failure Rate	Original Pass, Withdraw Rate
AA-level English				
ESL only	04.0%	07.9%	06.0%	12.1%
E Fun only	10.1%	17.3%	17.2%	29.5%
Both ESL & Fun	8.2%	14.5%	11.6%	20.6%
College English				
ESL only	0.0%	5.1%	0.0%	7.8%
E Fun only	2.9%	5.6%	4.9%	9.6%
Both ESL & Fun	2.4%	3.9%	3.4%	5.6%

Student failures and withdrawals confirm the emergent patterns in the enrollment data so far. ESL students outperform their English Fundamentals peers, sometimes rather dramatically. They seem to be particularly good at avoiding the outcome with potentially the most dire consequences, failing a degree-credit course. No Fall 1994 ESL-only student fails College English, though 5.1% of the original 177 do withdraw from the course. 4% of them fail AA-level English, but almost double that number withdraw. In contrast, a respective 10% and 8% of English Fundamentals students and students who experienced both forms of instruction fail AA-level English, and a respective 3% and 2.4% fail College English. Withdrawal rates are also higher for these groups, reaching 17.3% for English Fundamentals students. Figures 4 and 5 below provide a graphic overview of our findings.

Figure 4: AA-English Failure and Withdrawal Rates of Different College Prep Cohorts

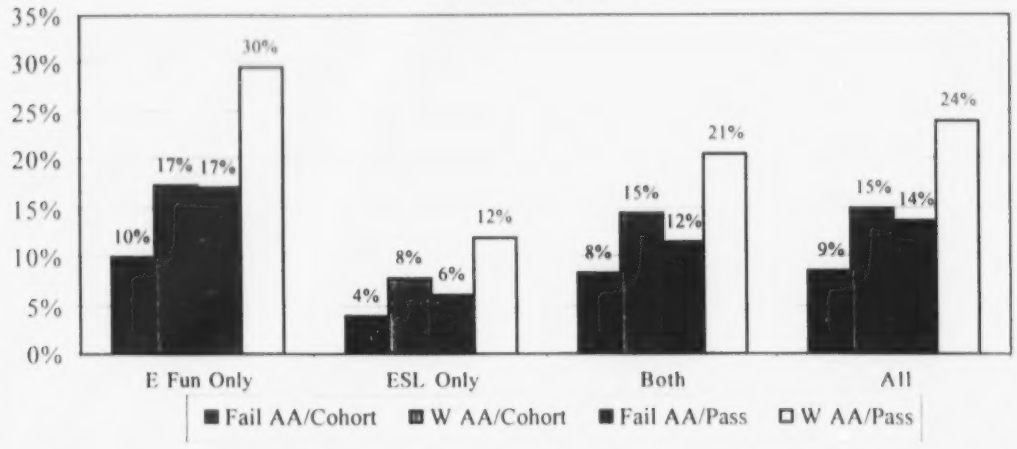
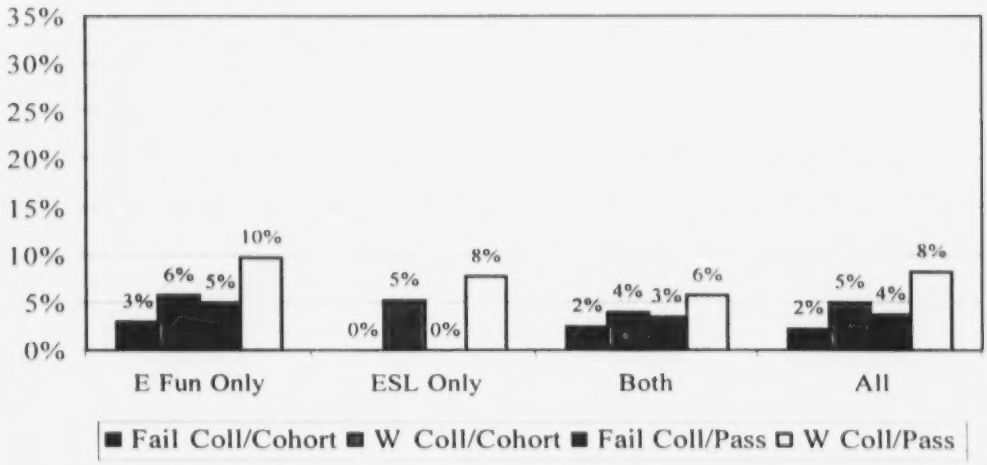


Figure 5: College English Failure and Withdrawal Rates of Different College Prep Cohorts



The failure and withdrawal rates of the latter are a little worrisome when they are estimated using the lower N of passing English Fundamentals students. Of those 366 passing students, 17.2% fail the AA-level course and almost 30% withdraw. In other words, almost half of them experience some trouble with the academic writing course they need to pass to complete any course of study. Students in the "Both" group, who also have had English Fundamentals instruction, also fail and withdraw from AA-level courses at less than optimal rates, with a

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combined rate of 34.2%. In contrast, the combined failure and withdrawal rates for passing ESL-only students add up to only 18%. Clearly, the level of academic preparation for each of the three groups in this study is different. What remains to be investigated is whether that academic preparation was distinct even before any student in any group began English writing instruction.

Historical Tracking

To confirm and expand the previous analysis, a second approach to tracking student English outcomes was conducted--historical tracking. Using the same SAS database previously described, enrollments in two levels of English were examined. Associate Degree level English students over multiple semesters (two Fall semesters, 1995 and 1997 at College 2 and the 1996 Fall semester at College 1) were divided into four groups matching the cohort definitions of the progress tracking system.

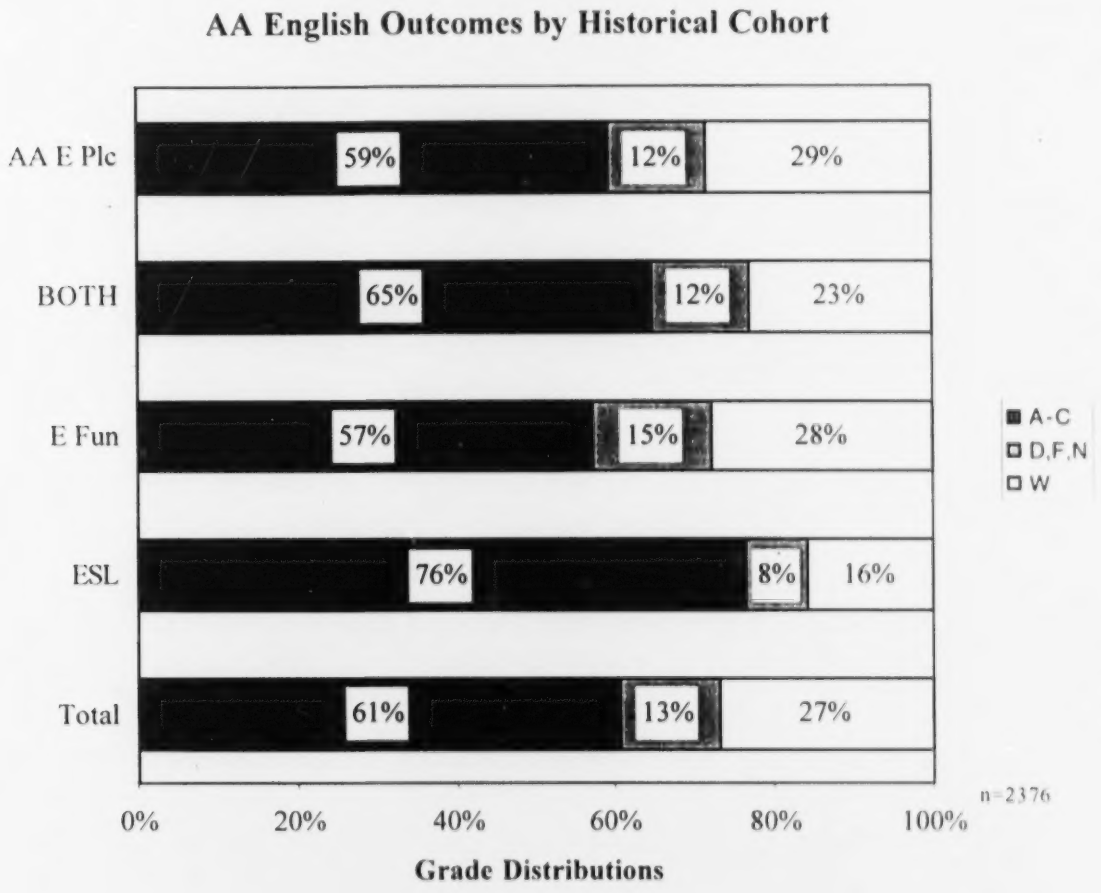
Table 6 displays the sample population percentages by college and as a combined group. In all, 2,371 student English histories were evaluated. A simple majority of students (59%) had neither an English as a Second Language local history nor an English Fundamentals local history. Therefore, most of these students were placed at this AA E level through a local assessment instrument, through assessment at a previous college, or through completion of a prerequisite course at another college outside of the district. At the same AA English level, 26% of the students had a history in a local English Fundamentals (E Fun) course but no ESL history. As expected, the E Fun cohort displayed a lower GPA in their AA degree English course than the AA English placement group.

Table 6: AA Level English GPA and Percents by Cohort

Instructional History:	College 1 % (N)	College 2 % (N)	College 1& 2 % of Total	College 1 AA E GPA	College 2 AA E GPA
AA E Placement	47%	71%	59%	2.74	2.31
ESL only	13%	04%	08%	2.76	2.66
E Fun only	30%	22%	26%	2.40	2.16
Both ESL & E Fun	10%	03%	06%	2.49	2.18
Total	100% (1164)	100% (1207)	100% (2371)	2.62	2.29

Figure 6 represents the grade distributions of each cohort. It clearly shows that the ESL cohort demonstrated greater success than the average student, with fewer withdrawals as well as fewer non-passing grades.

Figure 6: Grade Distributions of Cohorts with Different Instructional Histories



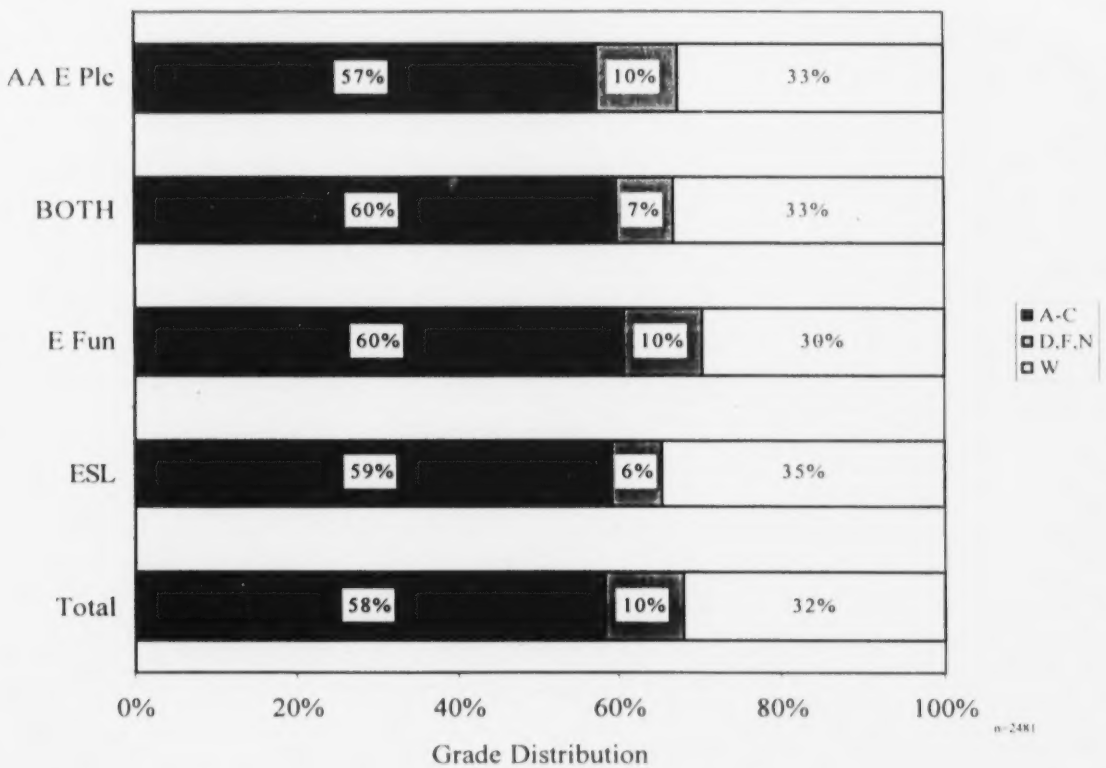
The patterns of student success are in keeping with our findings so far. ESL only students outperform English Fundamentals students, with respective group GPAs of 2.76 at College 1 and 2.66 at College 2. In addition, the students in the "Both" (ESL and E Fun) cohort also performed better than the "E Fun" cohort. However, outcomes for the ESL cohort and the "Both" cohort yielded more surprising results. At both colleges, the ESL only cohort achieved higher mean English course GPAs than the AA English placement cohort. For College 1, the difference between ESL only student GPAs and those students placed in AA-level English is a negligible 0.02, but at College 2, the difference is a more noticeable 0.35. Although the size of these cohorts is relatively small (as little as 3% of College 2's sample population), they still represent a respectable "N" of well over 100 students when semesters and colleges are combined.

Analysis of College English students yields different results. At this level of English, students with different histories performed much the same as the AA English cohort groups. Figure 7 and Table 7 display the results in College English by historical cohort.

Table 7: College English GPA and Percents by Cohort

Instructional History:	College 1 % (N)	College 2 % (N)	College 1& 2 % of Total	College 1 AA E GPA	College 2 AA E GPA
AA E+ Placement	64%	79%	73%	2.68	2.76
ESL only	06%	01%	03%	2.79	3.00
E Fun only	26%	18%	21%	2.43	2.53
Both ESL & E Fun	04%	02%	02%	2.71	2.81
Total	100% (914)	100% (1527)	100% (2441)	2.62	2.72

Figure 7: Grade Distributions of Cohorts with Different Instructional Histories



In general, the GPA profiles in this higher level course continue to discriminate between groups. However, when grades are grouped by passing, non-passing, and withdrawal, these differences disappear (as shown most clearly in Figure 3). Passing rates range from 58% to 60%, and are essentially indistinguishable. If a passing grade is the goal of our students, then each cohort performs much the same. However, if one examines the likelihood of an "A" or "B", then the local ESL history cohort continues to out perform other groups.

Discussion & Conclusion

Past and on-going studies of community college effectiveness and student outcomes have tended to focus on the institution's traditionally defined transfer and vocational training functions (e.g., Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Sanchez, 1997; Dougherty, 1994; Wisely, 1996). Current research aimed at satisfying federal and state legislative demands for accountability have stayed this course, settling on transfer rates, graduation rates, and degree and certificate completion as main indicators of student success and institutional effectiveness (Arnold, 1997; Chancellor's Office, California Community Colleges, 1996; Sweitzer et al, 1997).

The background gestalt that informs past and present research assumes that entering students should already be prepared to handle college level coursework and that they will pursue college coursework in traditionally assumed time frames and course taking patterns. Little consideration is given to defining outcome measures for students who don't fit this model. And though a series of studies sponsored by the Chancellor's Office of California Community Colleges and by the Intersegmental Council of California Academic Senates have focused on students for whom English is a second or additional language (see Ching, Ediger, and Poole, 1996; also see Dillon, 1996; Patthey-Chavez, 1996; Thomas-Spiegel, 1996), only a few studies have attempted to track the progress of non-ESL pre-collegiate basic skills students (see City College of San Francisco, 1998; Farland & Cepeda, 1990; Hull, 1992; Patthey-Chavez, 1994; 1996; 1997; Weissman et al, 1995). None of these studies of basic skills students has been based on an in depth examination of the actual course taking behavior of large groups of students over a long period of time. None have attempted to determine whether the educational pathways of remedial students match the patterns assumed for "traditional" college students.

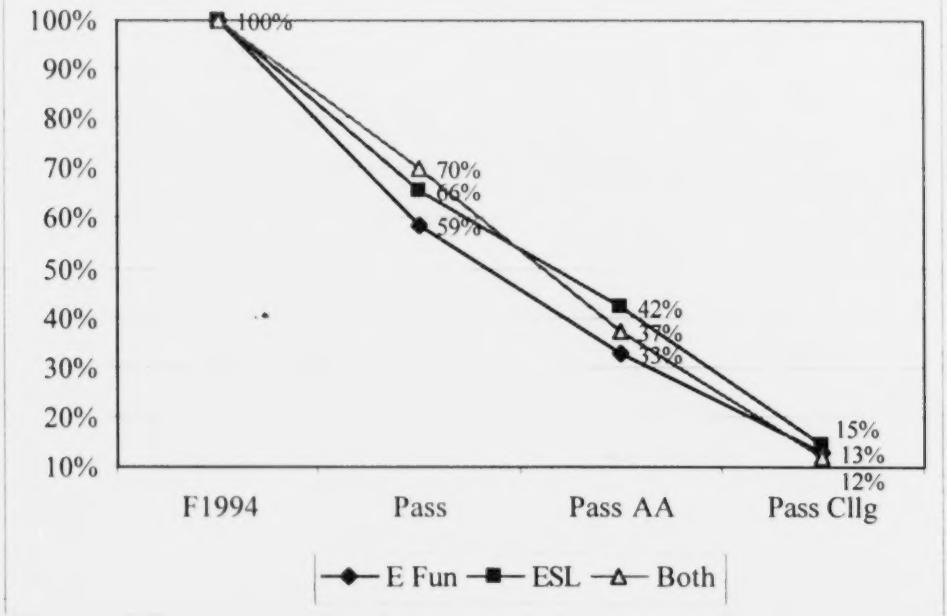
Living with the "should" rather than the "is" of their institutions, even in community colleges, many college instructors and administrators feel that remedial coursework belongs in adult schools, that it does not represent an important first step in a college career, and that it does not belong in the college curriculum. However, our preliminary research on both ESL students and remedial students shows that for many students, such coursework is preliminary to extensive further college work. Indeed, for up to half the students in our Fall 1994 "Progress" cohorts, it is a first step in an eventual attempt to pass the one English course they will need to pass to get a college degree. And interestingly enough, the one cohort that often focuses the professoriate's ire and frustration at an eroding college curriculum—the ESL cohort—turns out to be the most academically accomplished. "We" may well be turning into "an ESL school," but we seem to at least be good at it. Of the original 177 Fall 1994 students in the progress tracking cohort, 116 passed the initial course (65.5%), and 103 (89% of those 116, or 55.2% of the original 177) proceeded to AA-level English. Most of them eventually succeeded (80 or 45.2%).

The picture is far less bright for the other typical pre-collegiate basic skills students, the ones starting their college career in "English Fundamentals." They have lower initial success rates (58.6% pass the course), and though a comparable number (56.9%) attempt AA-level

English, fewer of them (229 or 36.7%) get through it successfully. Not surprisingly, the third group distinguished in this study, the group that crossed back and fourth between English Fundamentals and ESL instruction, struck an intermediate "success path," with success rates and GPAs somewhere between the relative heights achieved by the ESL group and the relative lows of the English Fundamentals group.

These English "survival" patterns, as we now call them, are represented graphically in our last Figure below, Figure 8. It displays similar progress tracking data from both colleges in our study. Many students in both colleges start the college writing enterprise, but few reach the college writing course. The picture is brighter for AA-level English, though even for that more modest goal, the progress of our English Fundamentals cohorts raises concerns—only 33% of College 1's English Fundamentals students complete AA-level English by Spring 1996, and only 35% of College 2. As stated above, the ESL students do better, with a respective 42% and 36% of our two ESL cohorts passing AA-level English within four semesters of their initial college preparatory writing course.

Figure 8: English Survival Rates of Different College-Preparatory Cohorts



With the progress tracking model, research involving pre-collegiate basic skills tracking as required by Partnership for Excellence is a fairly straight-forward process. This is important. The students we have tracked in this study tend to disappear in many proposed accountability models. The latter examine precisely the type of student least likely to enroll in college preparatory instruction: First-time freshmen tackling a full academic load. The students in this study do not fit this profile. Most are part-time students. Most do not have stellar academic credentials, and will not enroll in academic studies until later in their college-career. In addition,

the allowed time frame to calculate any eventual success rates in such areas as degree and certificate completion or transfer ensures that the successes of pre-collegiate students disappear as well. As we track these students, follow their progress, and identify their characteristics and needs, we are able to respond to the goal of increased progression through basic skills courses and also able to include this important group of students in our success models; therefore, we not only satisfy State goals, but our college missions as well.

Although not as effective for following the progress of individual students, the historical tracking model provides a snapshot of the eventual composition of AA-level and College-level English classrooms. This snapshot confirms and validates the findings of progress tracking, and also allows a comparison of different remedial cohorts with students without a Basic Skills or ESL history. This comparison tells us that ESL students at different colleges, with different breakdowns of primary language, in different semesters, show a pattern of higher achievement. Thus, using the historical tracking model, IR is able to add encouraging data and charts to Student-Right-To-Know information, as well as to any other accountability reports of the future. Not only are we able to focus on a much larger population than the one examined for SRTK-mandated research, we are able to raise an example of hope to basic skills and ESL students. With perseverance, they have an excellent chance of succeeding in college and AA degree levels of English. This is important proof of an attainable goal that should be shared along with any Student-Right-To-Know data published.

Finally, we hope our research will promote collegiate discussion of methods employed in ESL and English Fundamentals courses as community colleges begin not only to examine the pathways of pre-collegiate basic skills students, but to improve instruction and learning outcomes for them. Further study will include focus groups to begin the ongoing evaluative process of basic skills improvement, specifically as it relates to completion of key English courses.

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Appendix A

Basic SAS Procedures

To select cohorts and track student-progress through the local college writing curriculum, a set of SAS-based student tracking and transcript analysis programs were authored and applied. The tracking programs identified all students in the key sending courses, assembled each student's local transcript, and analyzed cohort transcript data. The student tracking system--STARS--consists of two fundamental components: (1) a SAS data set development component, with data sets modeled on the basis of the California Community College's Management Information System (MIS) data elements and (2) SAS programming procedures for analyzing the information contained in the data sets.

(1) SAS Data Sets

The tracking data base is a group of data sets produced from the Management Information System (MIS) contained in district data processing facilities. Whereas the MIS architecture is organized around the sections or course offerings database, the STARS IR system is organized around a master transcript file containing at least the following elements: student id, semester, section number, subject enrollments (including subject name and subject number), and enrollment outcomes (including grade, grade notation, add date, and drop date). The production of the master transcript file requires the merging of the MIS student enrollment table and the MIS section table. The master transcript file, sorted by student id and semester, then forms the basis of a longitudinal database. This organization is fundamental for the application of student tracking and transcript analysis procedures. The basic unit of analysis is the individual student transcript.

In addition to the master transcript file, the tracking system assembles other datasets containing information about students found in the MIS data bases. Minimally, these include basic demographic information (MIS's STUDENT BASIC TABLE and STUDENT TERM TABLE) and assessment information. We are also working on a student financial aid information database to investigate the influence of socio-economic variables and various campus support systems.

(2) SAS transcript analysis procedures

1. <u>By-group processing</u>

In the master transcript file, each student's transcript constitutes a SAS by-group by virtue of the sort order. Once a smaller, reduced data set has been defined, the reduced student transcript still constitutes a SAS by-group. (SAS also allows the creation of indexes but these constitute an unnecessary complication.) Subsequent by-group processing allows the creation of new variables contained in one record from the aggregation or analysis of variables contained in the multiple records of the by-group. Standard examples include semesters of attendance, units attempted, units completed, GPA, etc. One can also create variables using by group processing that respond to the special needs of the research being conducted; e.g., units completed in a specific subject area. This was done for the current study.

2. Merging

The "merge" statement is one of three SAS procedures for creating new, updated, or working datasets. "Merge" allows one to select observations from one working dataset on the basis of the presence of a common by-variable contained in another data set. Use of the merge statement facilitates the creation of datasets on the basis of any category for which one has or can construct data. For the current study, the first data step creates a dataset containing the student ids and semesters in which they were enrolled in the English and ESL composition courses. That reduced data-set is then unduplicated, and the resulting unduplicated student id set is merged with the relevant transcript data records. For the current study, the final dataset contained only the student transcripts for the students identified in the first step; i.e., students taking pre-collegiate level English in a given semester. This dataset was subsequently analyzed using the by group processing described above.

Conclusion

These basic procedures provide a powerful, rapidly applicable tool that can be used for a variety of IR functions, ranging from program review through student equity research. It is especially useful for the numerous ad hoc requests for information on special groups that seem to be the constant burden of community college institutional research.

One can also run standard outcome measures for a campus master transcript file each semester, as that file is updated, and simply use it as the basis for producing reports on the student outcomes of special student populations. It should be pointed out that the procedures described here only constitute the core framework of the tracking system that has been developed. Yet we have found that working with this framework yields unprecedented flexibility for pursuing and developing an extremely wide range of analyses.